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Reimagining Joyce's Dublin: an interview with **Freddie Phillipson**

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Reimagining Joyce's Dublin: an interview with Freddie Phillipson

Sarah Montague

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Marking the centenary of James Joyce's Ulysses, the Irish Architectural Archive (IAA) is holding an exhibition of drawings by the award-winning architect Freddie Phillipson. "The Ulysses Project" Exhibition is open to the public and free on entry at the IAA, at 45 Merrion Square, Dublin, from 16 June to 19 August 2022.

Sarah Montague. How and when did you first become interested in Joyce's Dublin?

Freddie Phillipson. There was topographical research carried out into the Dublin of *Ulysses* in the 1970s primarily, refreshed in the early 2000s. That was the work that I was aware of when I started becoming

interested in exploring the relationship between architecture and Joyce's Dublin. I was finishing my postgraduate studies at Cambridge. I was in my fifth year, and we were asked to write a dissertation in parallel with our design project.

I had just finished *Ulysses*, at the age of twenty-two; so I was the age of Stephen Dedalus. I'd finally got through it, third-time round, but I was completely baffled and entranced. I looked at the map at the beginning of the edition I had [the "Oxford World Classics" 1998 paperback of the original 1922 text] and started trying to draw the routes that were being described. Then, of course, I discovered all the research that had been done into the topographical order of the book ... these marvellous guides to the Dublin of James Joyce.

What struck me about these guides was that there was an evenness to them; all the locations that could be found in the directory or on the map that were associated with events in the text had been plotted in an even way, very useful. But, for example, they didn't differentiate between a place where we spend two sentences and a place where we spend a whole chapter; or a place which is remembered and a place that's actually experienced through the text; or a place that we are actually in, versus the address of a character who has been named, who was a real figure, who can be traced.

So, there's a sort of unpicking that could be done. On another level, I really wanted to understand the architectural topography of the book, because I felt intuitively that there was something here about the kind of limited condition of architecture, and what design does. I didn't know yet what that was, but I set myself the ambition of *exploring* the idea, because I didn't want to try to *explain Ulysses*. It's a work of art, it's complete in itself. It doesn't need me, but it says something about the tension between buildings and life. That's the thing I really wanted to get at.

SM. I think, although he would not have put it in those terms, Joyce knew it was a system.

FP. Well, yes. Didn't he say at one point that he thought maybe he'd over-systematised it, or something like this? I think he plays with systems, and our desire to know and our desire to categorise and unravel the book as though it's a puzzle. There are all those telling moments, for example, in Ithaca, where it appears that we know everything about this house, until we actually try to put it together. Then we realise there are so many gaps, all the information is a tease. We know a little bit, we know that there are five steps, but actually we don't know the rest of the staircase. We don't know exactly where things are in relation to each other.

I had read at the outset that Joyce famously said something like, "If Dublin were to disappear, you could rebuild it from my book." What a provocation ... it is one of those notorious things that gets him noticed, that makes him legendary. But, if you actually try to rebuild the city, which is what I have done, it takes the best part of, well, two decades. There's virtually no description, virtually no information other than addresses in the book itself. I think it's remarkable how evocative a text it is, considering there's so little which is visualised or actually described.

I think it's a book in which we re-enact things, embody them, inhabit them, but we don't really see them very much. I found it striking in relation to architecture, because there's a tendency – through the modes of architectural representation we normally use in architecture school, and just generally when we're communicating with other people, trying to get things built – which prioritises the visual. It seems to me this is only a small part of what architecture is, and that architecture is mostly about where we are. In this respect, I think *Ulysses* has a lot to say that's relevant to architecture. It also shows the limits of what architecture can do, and that's also useful to know as the architect. All this has led to the exhibition we're planning [at the IAA] in June.

Obviously, it began with this single word, the single day, the archaic Mediterranean somehow transposed onto Dublin one day in the early twentieth century. I think this foundational myth of the Odyssey has, from the title, already been displaced in a way, because we're not getting Odysseus, we're getting Ulysses. So it's translated into Latin. I think there's something about this displacement which is fundamental, and which is then recurring in the way we experience place in the text. We have this intricate minutely detailed portrait of a city with real buildings, real people that exist at the time, and they're being encountered by fictional characters.

I think the Odyssey is embodied by the reader because the reader is trying to unpick what is important about this, and what isn't. We aren't really given much help. We have details of Dublin at the time, and we have ideas, and we are trying to relate these to each other. As Joyce said, some of them are trivial and some are quadrivial. At any moment, something could open up a whole horizon of reference in European culture. I was interested in the schematic aspect that goes along with this, because you have, in a way, the ultimate naturalism (sort of end of that nineteenth-century tendency, I suppose), but also the schematic tendency which, again, the more you scrutinise it, the more it baffles you. The schematic tendency doesn't fully explain everything that's going on, nor does the knowledge of the *Odyssey*'s narrative explain the book. It's only one way of looking into it. You might almost as well have called it *Hamlet* or *Exodus*. We can see a sort of parody of what it is to schematise the relationship between the here-and-now and the conceptual.

SM. So it's false to think of it as a code.

FP. Yes, there is no one code that's going to crack it. It's not there to be deciphered. So you have the whole tradition of the earthly and the celestial being correlated through these schemata, and being parodied ... because the way these things meet in the text is so fleeting and is not dependable. We're talking about a sort of topography of accidents and chance meetings and fleeting understandings rather than coordinated meaning. It seems to me that's important to understand in architecture. It's there in the first drawing I made about *Ulysses* without really knowing much about the spatial order of the buildings.

SM. Can you describe the drawings a little? Right now we're looking at a map, on which you've super-imposed images. [Figure 1]

FP. Yes. This drawing is structured really by a line running through the middle, which is evoking the Liffey. There are pieces of text, which were taken from the reprint of the first edition. There is a person [in the illustration]. To me, he's a young boy. He could be Stephen Dedalus in a portrait, but it's just there in a way to try and correlate the human scale and the scale of the city, the sense of being in a particular place, but also the disembodied nature of words. There's something about this confluence of things that I was trying to unpick. I then tried to think visually about ways of making, not illustrations of the book, but analogues for it. So, on the one hand, I felt it could be something like a George Grosz drawing from the 1920s.

SM. Exactly what I thought it looked like [we view a copy of George Grosz's *Querschnitt*, 1920].

FP. Yes, yes. And the way that you are seeing the middle ground, the foreground, the detail, but also the cityscape at the same time. Because Joyce selectively gives you just moments and close-ups, and then sometimes you have a sweeping sense of a street ... the sense of being also immersed in the movement of the city. There's something about the overlapping quality of the lines in the [Grosz] drawing that I think gives that feeling. On the other hand, you have a whole set of much older representations of place, whereby people have tried to do what Joyce's schemata purport to do, which is locate something abstract in something concrete.

What came to mind there was the wonderful book by Frances Yates [*The Art of Memory*] where she analyses the tradition of memory theatre and the evolution of this through the Renaissance. These slightly older examples from the Middle Ages are taken from her book [we view illustrations from Yates' book]. What interested me is that this is the topography of an abbey ... the different constituent buildings, and the idea is that one is able to use

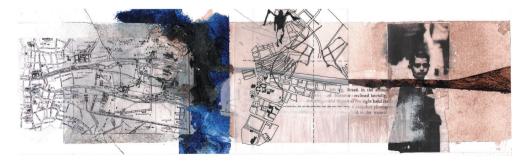


Figure 1. Liffey – collage, 2003. Image copyright Freddie Phillipson Architect.

this as a mnemonic aid by correlating letters or words with particular buildings. By locating the idea or the sentence in the building in your mind, you are then able, effectively, to make speech. There's something about that effort which raises the tension between architecture and thinking, or place and thinking. I think *Ulysses* inhabits that tension.

In a way, the dimension of the place, which I think is the least visible or readily understandable in *Ulysses*, is that middle ground of the actual configuration of rooms, which are there, but not highlighted. We're in this sort of textual labyrinth, yet we've also got our feet on the ground because we can see details of very particular things – even just a part of someone's face. It's coming right into the foreground, and the middle ground is missing. The middle ground is really what I've been unpicking. To do this, I went back through the text and I copied out every reference to something tangible I could find.

SM. Was it important that you do that manually? I imagine a concordance would help, but that's a very mechanical approach.

FP. There's a digitised version of *Ulysses* which you can search, but the first time around, it did help me to do it manually because I think I was having to look very closely and I wanted to look at it afresh. I didn't want to look only through the topographical analysis that existed already. I wanted to understand *how* does the place appear? Are we inhabiting it? In what way? What aspects of this place are included?

SM. Here, are we looking at your handwriting? (Figure 2)

FP. I had the book with me and I was going through it and just noting down page references and lines. The beginning of my research was picking out the words, which really embodied the settings. In parallel with this, as part of my original academic dissertation, I had been taking the topographical analysis and superimposing all of the maps. I wanted to see, not just episode by episode where we're going, I wanted to understand the continuity between episodes, the sort of continuity of the place because certain places appear multiple times. We loop back on ourselves, we encounter them in different guises. Things came out of this, which suggested that there was even an element of the construction of symbols through the topographical work that Joyce may have been aware of himself.

SM. I also think with a lot of these people – Virginia Woolf is another one, of course – they were intuiting things for which we now have a technology. They are hypertext writers, even if there was no vocabulary for that.

FP. Yes and hypertext is so suited to Joyce in a way, isn't it? I wanted to go beyond dots on a map. I didn't want it to be just points on a cartographic representation. I wanted to understand what each place actually was like in 1904, and then to see whether that was important or not. One of the longest standing pieces of research has been to find out which buildings were there at the time. How were they at the time? It's harder than it sounds, in the sense that most have been demolished or altered in some way. Is there any relationship between what the configuration of the building was and how the text treats it, and what the text might say about the relationship between architecture and thinking?

I checked all locations and gradually got to a point where I was fairly sure what the topography was. I then had to do archival work with whatever old drawings I could find: survey drawings, maps, working backwards from later drawings. Sometimes the building had been rebuilt, but you can see traces of the earlier building. I had to do work that I think would probably never have interested Joyce, because he probably would never

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Figure 2. Place references, 2006 (excerpt). Image copyright Freddie Phillipson Architect.

have cared whether the staircase was like this or like that. But, I had to do it because what he knew intuitively and through memory, we can't see anymore. So I had to do a level of analysis which goes far outside the boundaries of the text, in order to get back to what the text is telling us. That's how I saw it. As I was doing this, I was also thinking about a way of

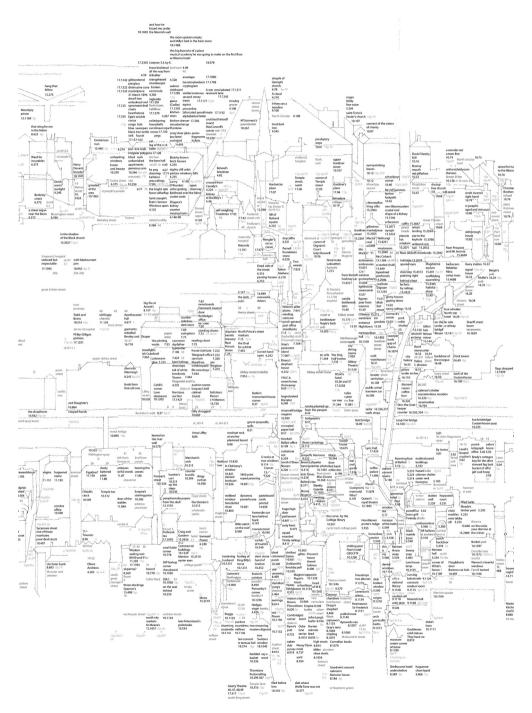


Figure 3. Word topography of *Ulysses'* Dublin 2008, 2020 (detail). Image copyright Freddie Phillipson Architect.

representing the city, which would go beyond the map, which would immerse us in the experience of the city as we have it in the text. So I started thinking of ways in which I could redraw the map in a way that made it more immersive, that didn't stick purely to the surveyed arrangement and started to get across something about how we experience architecture in the city. I started to develop a larger topographic drawing, where I was gradually adapting the form of the streets, such that we could look broadly from south to north, but in a way that prioritised only the parts which Joyce includes.

SM. We're looking here at an annotated version of the map (Figure 3). Are these notes from the text?

FP. They're all excerpts from the text, coming out of the work I'd done to find the particular way in which he [Joyce] sort of makes reference to the setting. What I've done is place the extracts in the location that they refer to within my drawing. So it gives you a sense of the kind of density and aggregation of thinking and experience. Some parts of Dublin are not visited at all ... other parts are very intensely lived through the text. The words don't directly become drawings because I'm not purely illustrating things. I'm taking the parts of the building which are relevant at that moment when a thought is being had. So I'm on the staircase. I think of the cat that was here in the morning or whatever, or I'm thinking about travelling to England, sitting at the table in the front room. The topography that's relevant appears, and the rest fades into the background.

SM. I know it's a long-established practice in architectural drawing that renderings should be blue, but I find that the quality is rather dreamlike, *because* it's blue.

FP. Well, because it's made in pencil, it's not mechanically done. When you make a black and white drawing digitally, you automatically have a very pure, clean sort of line. Whereas here, it's never perfect. I wanted also to show the vulnerability of it, because I haven't mastered the text and made it sort of visual. Not at all. I want the drawing to exist in parallel with the text, [to have] its own life ... a vulnerability about it.

The drawings, which I was developing episode by episode, location by location, started to cohere into this larger topographic drawing that I was building up incrementally (Figure 4). There are drawings where there's a lot of cheating going on, according to architectural drawing standards. For instance, the people are essentially double the size they should be in relation to the building, because in Joyce, if you drew it literally, you would get a very different feeling [to that of the text]. The person would be rather small against this big facade or something. So I wanted to always prioritise the feeling of inhabiting the architecture.

SM. There's a little horse in there.

FP. The horse and cart. This is episode seven. We're at the newspaper offices and printing works, and we start out here on Prince's Street going past the cart with the barrels. Then we enter the printing works at the north end. We're at the counter at the beginning of the episode where Red Murray is cutting out that square from the newspaper. Bloom goes through a side door, up a stair in fact. Teasingly, he says, "Along the stair." So you think, "Well, what does that mean? Does it mean up or down or along the side?" We emerge on Middle Abbey Street to the south. This work really was only concluded about two years ago, because I revisited the drawing three times and got to the final size, which is quite large: about 2.7 metres wide; 1.8 metres high. So it's like a little room.

SM. And the exhibit will be this drawing with all of the supporting materials?

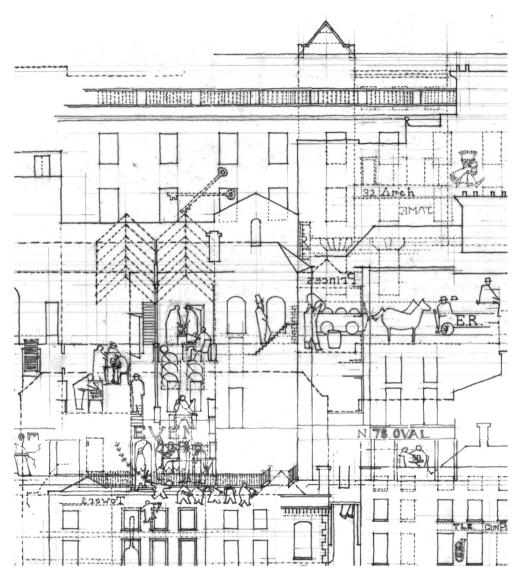


Figure 4. Topographic drawing 2008, 2020 (detail of chapter 7). Image copyright Freddie Phillipson Architect.

FP. That's correct. There are actually two rooms and there's one room, which is essentially organised around the large drawing, with the supporting materials are laid out alongside. There's a second room, which goes into the second chapter of the analysis, which is looking at ten key buildings which I identified; [ones] which are privileged in the text because we spend essentially a whole chapter there.

There's a sense of *Ulysses* being the ultimate modernist city novel – wandering all the streets and seeing shop fronts and signs and remembering things and so on. I think that's also a popular conception of the book, particularly [by] people who haven't read it, that it just consists of walking and walking and walking, but actually more than half of it is sitting

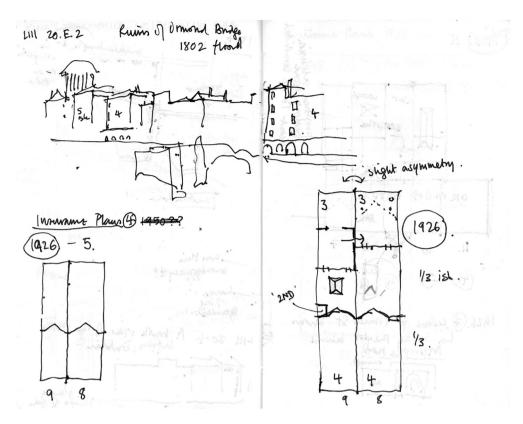


Figure 5. Archival research, 2008 (details of Ormond Hotel). Image copyright Freddie Phillipson Architect.

still. In fact, in some episodes, especially with Stephen [Dedalus], he's totally stationary. If you try to plausibly reconstruct where people are in the room and what they're doing, he's almost immobile. He's so much in his head, travelling all over the world and through time in his mind, but essentially just sitting in a chair, and it seems to me this is an important aspect of what Joyce has done ... there is wandering, and there is stasis, and there's a tension between them.

I wanted to focus on the ten buildings and to understand them in a more forensic way. This is where I went further than the analysis of the city as a whole (Figure 5). I tried to find as much factual information as possible about each building; at least the time when Joyce we know encountered it, which also complicated the analysis because it's not enough to just look at 1904. There is a spectrum.

Joyce revisited Dublin a few times before his final visit; I think 1912 is the last time. We don't know when he went to some of the buildings. We know that he went in some cases after 1904 and, interestingly, as other researchers have found, some of those buildings were altered in the period between 1904 and the time we know he went there. So, you have this question of where, in the spectrum, are you looking at the history of this building? I can't get right down to the moment, but I can get pretty close, within ten years.

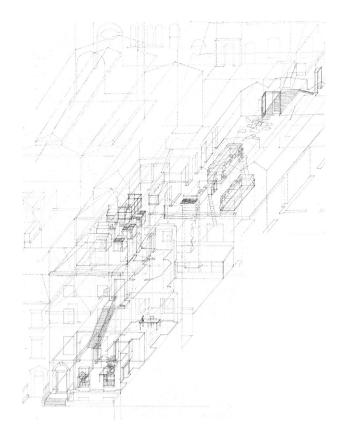


Figure 6. Reconstruction drawing of *Freeman's Journal* premises, 2021 (detail). Image copyright Freddie Phillipson Architect.

For example, this is a drawing of the *Freeman's Journal* building (Figure 6). It's drawn accurately to scale with the correct measurements as far as I could reconstruct it. I had partial information from some survey plans. It's certainly interesting on an urban and a social level to see, for example, this building where it's effectively an urban city block that has been filled-in over time. It started out as Georgian houses with gardens. Over time, these works were joined up and made into the printing works of the papers.

They had their offices in the old houses that faced onto Middle Abbey Street. I find that an interesting thing about how a city evolves and how people used buildings at the time. But in terms of what we conceive of as important architecture, it wasn't. That's partly why there's so little information and why it is a matter of luck, whether you find it or not. I was lucky with this one; there were some apparently overlooked drawings in the Irish Architectural Archive. So I worked from those to make this representation. When you look at the parts which are highlighted, hopefully your eye can follow the route through the building as we have it in the text and as best I can reconstruct it.

For each of the ten buildings I went through a process of looking at all the information I could find. There were these wonderful Goad fire insurance plans from the early twentieth century. They don't cover everything because you had to pay for it to be

surveyed. And not everybody really did. Similarly with the *Shaw's Directory* of 1850. This is a fantastic resource, which again, is not perfect for Joyce, because it's fifty years old by the time of *Ulysses*. But it covers the streets very well.

SM. So there's this kind of actuarial approach where all the ways in which a city might be measured or counted become part of your arsenal.

FP. Yes. And there's a sort of analogue to how Joyce worked with *Thom's Directory*. For example, there's a sort of slightly dead-pan quality to these elevation drawings [in Shaw's], which I wanted to play-off against in my drawing in the way that I think Joyce not only looked at *Thom's Directory*, but he played with it. When he gives you an address of a place in the book, it's like an extract from there. It's almost a quotation.

There's even that wonderful moment when the carriage in Hades is going up to the cemetery and we pass the Stonemason's Yard and we don't get Thomas Dennany as the mason, we get "Thos. H. Dennany," as it would've been in an address book. And I think it's evoked, more than just used. It's built into it in the way that Joyce builds this experience of writing it into the text. He provokes you to bring back some of the experience of creating the text in the moment. So there was something here that was analogous to my working with these resources in the drawing.

Some work has to be done through precedent: for instance, the Ormond hotel was adapted from a pair of Georgian houses. To understand the internal disposition of the hotel, one has to understand the typical disposition of a Georgian house ... particularly [how] the arrangements of the back rooms vary in little and unpredictable ways across the whole city. You have to build up your library of typical ways in which those rooms would've been handled in the architecture. You wouldn't have demolished something. Money was very short. It takes time, effort, and so on. There were small adaptations that were made incrementally that allowed the setting to be made appropriate for the new use.

SM. Which makes the buildings themselves feel like characters to you.

FP. They could be seen like that. The back room particularly gives them an individuality. It's interesting where that counts in the book and where it doesn't. But certainly they have a strong character, they have a sort of conformity to the front and more individuality to the back within very restricted means: a bay window of a certain proportion, an arrangement of two windows versus one. There is a certain palette of things which recur.

SM. What was Bloom's house like?

FP. Well, in many ways, it was as typical as you could get–a mid-range eighteenthcentury house. It has a bay window arrangement, which could be seen as rather unusual. Again, it depends on what parameters you set. That it's a bay window, is very typical. In the exact proportions and so on, it seems pretty unusual. So, for some Joyceans, that is a way in which there's a very, very subliminal joke or comment by Joyce in choosing that particular building: here's Leopold Bloom who's every man in [being] very ordinary, but actually very remarkable in his own way, like all people are. There might be something in that, but then you see this is where the analysis goes in terms of reconstructing the buildings [we view further reconstruction drawings]. The vertical dimension is usually missing from the information I had. So that's where I really had to draw from the precedent and work out typical floor-to-ceiling heights and actually get back to what the anatomy of the building might have been.

I also went as far as I could with the photographic evidence. So sometimes I made a 3D model here of the buildings that I had survey information for. I was trying to work out, for example, where the fireplaces at the back of the Ormond, where the singing takes place, would originally have been, because those are the kind of things that would not have moved, not have changed very much. They would've had to probably just block them up if they didn't want them. So they're kind of anchors: where the staircase is, where the fireplaces were, and where the entrance was.

SM. So often we're looking at something that is an actual picture, but you have placed something on top of it?

FP. Yes, I've reconstructed. I took the map, reconstructed the known buildings that I had survey information for. Then I made a view from the 3D model that matched as closely as I could get to the photograph. Then I superimposed the two to see, "Okay, that chimney marries up very well. I think I've got it in the right place in my model, but there are other ones appearing behind there, for example, that I haven't yet placed." It was a little bit hit and miss, but I was kind of moving the chimney around, the elements around in the model and then mapping them back onto the photo and seeing how closely they work. [In] this kind of testing, you can see I'm trying out different configurations for the fireplaces in the back rooms, and seeing whether they were plausible in relation to that view.

SM. Just take us through the exhibition as a whole and what you hope people will take away from it:

FP. In the final exhibit, we have one room, which is the city drawing. Then we have this other room, which is the ten buildings. The ten buildings divide to two groups. There are six houses. They are all adaptations of a Georgian house, which all had the same plan. I find that really remarkable because the verbal and conceptual pyrotechnics are in parallel with the simplest of plans, which consists of two rooms and a staircase. And I think it says a lot about architecture, and these are my drawings of those six buildings: Bloom's house, newspaper offices, Ormond Hotel, Barney Kiernan's pub, the maternity hospital (which is little more than a table and a fireplace in terms of the experience of the text), and Bella Cohen's house.

Then there are what I call non-houses, in the sense that they're all purpose built, free standing, one-off buildings. Mostly, they are inhabited by Stephen Dedalus. I think there is a game going on between the houses, which have a repeated kind of rhythm; they're embedded in the city. They're largely Leopold Bloom's episodes. There are these one-off strange places, which are basically Stephen Dedalus's episodes.

SM. Because he doesn't know who he is or where he belongs?

FP. No. And he's wandering, and he's lost and he's a bit caught in his own mind. I think that there's something deliberate about that, which hasn't been highlighted before. So the drawings are the Martello Tower, the Dalkey School, the National Library, and the cabman's shelter. The fascinating thing about the exhibition rooms is that whilst they're in a grander house than most of Joyce's houses, they have the front and back room relationship, which is typical of his settings. I wanted to play with that, and I also wanted to bring the archival material in direct correlation with my drawings. This is the basic layout: the two rooms ... in the middle of each room, a large table, which contains all

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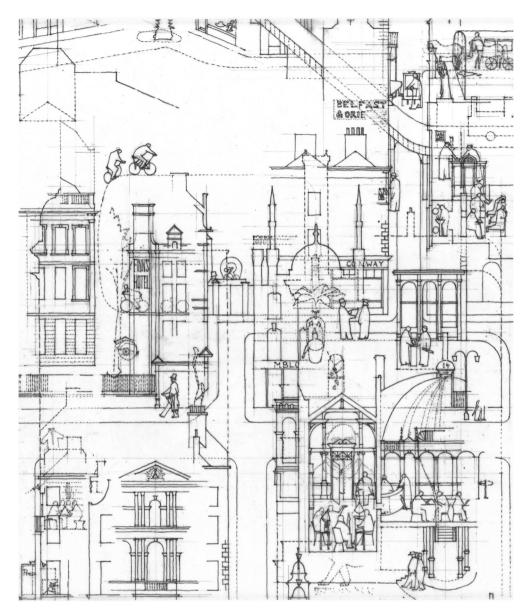


Figure 7. Topographic drawing 2008, 2020 (detail). Image copyright Freddie Phillipson Architect.

these fragments of drawing, which are the things I used to get to the final drawings. You are invited to navigate in the way that Joyce invites you - he doesn't give you much help, but he asks you to make your own relations and connections between things.

SM. Many exhibitions these days seem to demand that you create an interactive moment for your audience. Is there something like that in this one?

FP. We haven't fully planned it, but I'm hoping that people will engage with it, and that might mean there's an element of performance to it. I want to take people around it, talk them through it, give them a feeling for the work that went into it and hear what they

have to say as well. I think it'll be really interesting to see what people make of it. In a way, I'm very nervous about that. I don't know how people will react. Everybody, I think, who loves Joyce perhaps feels a very personal connection because you have to work so hard at the books. Then when you've got to some sense of them, it's like, they're yours. So, I don't know how people will react.

SM. How many times did you go to Dublin?

FP. I've only been three times and because of the pandemic, I spent nearly two years doing it all remotely. But one of the really helpful people I spoke to from the Joyce Museum in Sandycove, said, "Well, in a way, you're doing it like Joyce had to do it, because he was all over the continent sending letters to Aunt Josephine asking, 'Could you count how many steps there are at Leahy's Terrace? It's important for this paragraph.'"

SM. So, you're walking in his footsteps (Figure 7).

FP. In some ways, in a very small way.

Note

For further information about the "The Ulysses Project" Exhibition at the IAA, 45 Merrion Square, Dublin, 16 June — 19 August 2022, see https://ulysses100.ie/posts/the-ulysses-project-architecture-and-the-city-through-james-joyce-s-dublin-drawings-by-freddie-phillipson-architect

A selection of Freddie Phillipson's studies, with the related passages from Ulysses, can be found at https://drawingmatter.org/

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).